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ABSTRACT

For the young child, the onset of speech and language acquisition is a milestone to be expected somewhere between 10-30 months of age. Behaviors exhibited by the people in the child's environment both before and after the onset of speech have infinitely more impact upon language learning--and eventually all learning--than the onset of the event itself. It is the nature of language learning which currently influences success in school. Children from mainstream American homes begin along their path toward a positive school experience almost immediately. Phonemic awareness is a very powerful predictor of whether a child will become a good reader and is one of the elements necessary for students to gain knowledge of the orthographic cipher. Students who arrive at school with little or no exposure to print are not phonemically aware. They need instruction and literacy events which will give them the phonemic awareness necessary for the beginning of reading instruction. (CR)

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Phonemic Awareness: One Key to Literacy Acquisition

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At the beginning of every school year, a new and eager group of children trustingly present themselves to the academic world for the first time. Similarly, after much preparation for the beginning of the new school year, teachers enthusiastically embrace the challenge of enriching and enhancing the lives of each of their students. With the joyous anticipation found at the opening night of a play, teachers and learners together celebrate the onset of their adventure. Both teachers and students possess high levels of anticipation and expectation. One would think, with all the power of these collective positive attitudes about teaching and learning, that few children would meet with failure. Unfortunately, teachers and students alike are often oblivious to the fact that their personal worlds, their cultures, do not yield a common experience. Herein lies the basis for potential failure of students who have grown up in an environment unlike that of the mainstream--the culture of power (Delpit, 1988).

Human beings exhibit developmental behaviors across cultures at consistent and predictable stages of life. Onset of speech and language acquisition is a milestone to be expected somewhere between ten and thirty months of age.

But just because this particular event is predictable does not mean that the subsequent course of language development is also predictable. Behaviors exhibited by the people in the child's environment both before and after the onset of speech have infinitely more impact upon language learning--and eventually all learning--than the onset event itself. It is the nature of language learning which currently influences success in school.

Children from mainstream homes begin along their path toward a positive school experience almost immediately. Babies are brought home from the hospital to antisepticly clean rooms which are decorated with all sorts of visual and auditory stimuli. These children are engaged in conversation with their parents from the first day of their lives. Parents pose questions to the baby and answer for the baby. They talk to the baby and entertain her constantly. Before too long, parents are reading stories to their babies while explaining and labeling illustrations within the books. The language of books and everyday language often become one. The structure of the language of books serves as a model for the structure of the child's speech. Talk and conversation occupies a great deal of the child's time. Parents constantly encourage and scaffold the child's speech. As the baby grows into a toddler, she delights in nursery rhymes and often can predict some words or phrases from repeated

exposure to books. Parents continue to read to the child, often at bedtime, and the child begins to receive a clear message that the print in books can somehow be translated into speech. How miraculous! Not only do children realize that print can be translated into speech, they come to know that reading is an event that yields comfort and joy. Yes, mainstream children arrive at school with a burning and compelling need for the secret code which will open the door marked "literacy." More important to their subsequent success, however, is the fact that they already know the first few elements to the code and those who possess that knowledge will find the rest of the code easier to acquire.

Heath describes the early experiences of children within another culture quite differently (Heath, 1982). They arrive home from the hospital to equally clean surroundings yet babies are not assigned their own space. They immediately become a connected member of the group--the family. There are no visual or auditory stimuli specifically targeted for the child. The baby spends most of his first year in the arms of parents and other family members. The child is an intregal part of family life and experiences first hand all of the language used as a vehicle for everyday interactions. Yet babies and toddlers are not considered to be viable conversation partners. They are rarely directly addressed but they are spoken around and about. Questioning a baby or

toddler and thus modeling appropriate response patterns is a concept which does not exist within this culture. The onset of speech is met with indifference, early efforts being neither encouraged nor discouraged. Children eventually come to mimic words and phrases which they have repeatedly heard. Language acquisition for children within this culture is the product only of speech used in everyday life. They are not exposed to books and the language of books. They can therefore not model their speech from the structure of language found in print. Children within this culture are loved and nurtured in many ways but their lack of experience with books and elements of discourse at an early age place them in a holding pattern in terms of literacy acquisition.

Children from divergent cultures come to school with many common experiences but it is their culturally unique experiences in terms of language learning that will shape the nature and outcome of their schooling. It has been found that phonemic awareness is a very powerful predictor of becoming a good reader (Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986; Juel, 1988; Ehri & Sweet, 1991; Stanovich, 1986; Tunmer, Herriman & Nesdale, 1988) even more so than general measures of intelligence such as IQ (Juel, Griffith & Gough, 1986). Phonemic awareness is also one of two elements necessary for students to gain knowledge of the orthographic cipher. With knowledge of the cipher, students learn to master decoding skills along with

rules concerning spelling-sound correspondence (Juel, Griffith & Gough, 1986). Knowledge of the cipher enables and fortifies the student's reading skill and leads to automaticity. Automaticity in reading facilitates comprehension and thus a non-frustrating, enjoyable reading event. But students who arrive at school with little or no exposure to print are not phonemically aware! The fire of phonemic awareness is fueled by reading of books and stoked by elements of discourse. Some students lack elements which lead to phonemic awareness. They cannot interact with curriculum designed for students who have had these experiences and be successful. Even direct instruction in phonics will do little to foster literacy for the child who lacks phonemic awareness (Juel, 1988). Without addressing and correcting the student's lack of phonemic awareness subsequent instruction will only lead to frustration, failure and a plethora of other negative consequences.

Good teachers should do what they have done for years and years--learn about each individual student and address his needs. But teachers must also be ever mindful and aware that children who are members of minority cultures might have acquired language in a different way than the mainstream. These children need to be given the opportunity to succeed. They need instruction and literacy events which will give them the phonemic awareness necessary for the beginning of

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reading instruction. They cannot succeed unless they have the code. Just because all of those smiling little children appear to be eager and ready to learn does not mean that they possess those first few elements of the code--phonemic awareness--which will eventually open the door to literacy.

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